

Fillon vs Juppé: What policy differences are there between the French centre-right's candidates?

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*In the first round of the primary to select the French centre-right's candidate for the 2017 presidential election, François Fillon unexpectedly came out in first place, ahead of favourite Alain Juppé, and former President Nicolas Sarkozy, who was subsequently eliminated. **Françoise Boucek** assesses the policy differences between Juppé and Fillon ahead of the second round due to be held on Sunday.*



The surprise result of last week's primary for the French centre right presidential nomination, whose second round will be held on 27 November, suggests that France's presidential elections next April might also hold some surprises. François Fillon's unexpected and clear victory in the first-round, ahead of long-time favourite Alain Juppé, and the elimination of former President Nicolas Sarkozy, make for difficult predictions. But the televised debate on 24 November revealed a sharp contrast in policy approach between Fillon's transformative stance and Juppé's policy of adjustment.

Can former Prime Minister and Paris MP François Fillon maintain his winning streak to defeat the 71 year-old mayor of Bordeaux this Sunday? Juppé trailed him by 16 points in the first round but remains one of the most popular French politicians. Fillon, on the other hand, should be able to count on the support of Sarkozy's followers. In his concession speech last Sunday, Sarkozy personally endorsed his loyal former Prime Minister, although he didn't tell his supporters how they should vote in the second round.

Open party primaries are a new thing in France. The Socialists first adopted this voting system in 2011 to select their candidate for the 2012 presidential election won by François Hollande. Then, all supporters on the left (not just active party members) were allowed to vote in exchange for a minimum contribution of €1 and signing a charter supporting the general values of the left. The Socialists won't select their presidential candidate until January, but Hollande, despite being the most unpopular French president of the Fifth Republic, hasn't ruled himself out so far. And his young protégé Emmanuel Macron recently resigned as economy minister to run for the presidency as an independent candidate. So there is a lot of uncertainty on the left as well.

By adopting a similar voting system as the left, the Républicains introduced a new element in their nomination race, at least for the first round. But through lending their support to the 'Anyone but Sarko' camp, voters from the left who had paid their €2 to vote last Sunday succeeded in throwing Sarkozy out of the race. Arguably, they also simultaneously influenced the selection of the centre-right candidate who will become favourite to face far right Front National leader Marine Le Pen if she makes it to the presidential second round next April, as her father did in 2002. Then, incumbent President Jacques Chirac managed to unify forces on the centre left and centre right to fight Marine's father (Jean Marie) in the runoff race.

However, after the shock elections of Labour Leader Jeremy Corbyn, Brexit and Trump, poll predictions have become a hazardous game. In his vigorous campaign this week, Juppé seized upon every opportunity to associate Fillon with Sarkozy's unpopular presidency. He nevertheless refrained from doing so in the rather polite two-hour televised debate. Of course, Juppé also held three ministerial portfolios in the Sarkozy administration (environment, defence and foreign affairs).

Policy differences

So, what policies distinguish the two finalists from each other? Fillon, relatively unknown until last week, has been caricatured in the media as a Thatcherite economic liberal and social conservative representing the reactionary 'hard' right in France. In comparison, Juppé is associated with the more centrist 'soft' wing of the moderate French right. However, these labels can be misleading as they ignore the long history and unifying tradition of the Gaullist party to which both candidates belong.

On the economy and employment their manifesto pledges are not diametrically opposed to one another. On the contrary, both propose cutting public spending and public sector jobs, though by different amounts (500,000 for Fillon and 300,000 for Juppé); raising the rate of VAT by 2% (Fillon) and 1% (Juppé); and scrapping the 'confiscatory' wealth tax introduced by Hollande. Both also propose to raise the maximum retirement age to 65 but at different speeds; to limit the unemployment benefits that any individual can collect; and to progressively phase out the totemic 35-hour week in the private and public sectors (although Juppé is more reluctant *vis à vis* the public sector).

On social policy, much has been made of Fillon's conservative attitudes on adoption for gay couples and on same sex marriage, which are informed by his Catholicism, and his views on identity politics and communitarianism, which he opposes. Both Fillon and Juppé say they wouldn't repeal the law on same sex marriage if they became president. However, Fillon's conservative attitudes seem to resonate with the *petite bourgeoisie* and lower middle class in many parts of rural France, whose voters feel increasingly disconnected from the cosmopolitan political elite in Paris and Brussels, and who worry about France's capacity to integrate its growing immigrant population.

On foreign policy and particularly relations with Russia, Fillon clarified during Thursday's televised debate that the interests of France remain clearly anchored to its strong alliance with the United States and NATO. He added that France needs to rebuild its relations with Russia in light of Hollande's 'absurd' politics which have fostered a nationalist reflex and encouraged Russia's isolation. This was to counter claims that Putin was trying to interfere in the French presidential election (as in Trump's election in the US) through his alleged endorsement of Fillon this week.

The tone of the televised debate did, however, indicate differences in the candidates' understanding of the problems facing France's economy and society today, which might shape their potential presidency in different ways and help voters decide on Sunday. Fillon's key message was about transformation and a programmatic approach to removing state barriers and 'de-bureaucratizing' public services in health, internal security and policing. When asked by the moderators whether he plans to break with France's post-war social model, Fillon immediately retorted 'what social model? You mean the social model that has generated six million unemployed; the model that keeps two million young people out of the job market? This is a model that no longer exists and is leaking water from every part'.

Fillon wants to reduce state barriers in order to encourage economic prosperity, restore full employment and create a more inclusive society that will 'redirect' those people on the extreme part of France towards the centre right. In contrast, Juppé's less radical approach involves making adjustments to existing policies. This more cautious approach has undoubtedly been informed by Juppé's traumatic failure as Jacques Chirac's Prime Minister in the mid-1990s to introduce welfare reforms, which triggered mass demonstrations and forced his resignation. On Sunday, conservative voters will decide which vision they prefer and which candidate is more likely to defeat Marine Le Pen next April.

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